

## **Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers**

### **Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034**

#### **Oral History of Michelle Erickson, Direct Services Coordinator with the Abused Adult Resource Center**

**Bismarck, North Dakota on April 3, 2017**

#### **Summary of Interview**

Michelle Erickson works at the Abused Adult Resource Center, located at 218 West Broadway, Bismarck, North Dakota, 58501. Michelle is the Direct Services Coordinator, overseeing staff and programs for people leaving abusive relationships and in need of shelter or housing.

This interview took place at the address above, in the office of Diane Zainhovsky, the Executive Director of the Abused Adult Resource Center.

Note: Diane Zainhovsky participated to assist with some of the interview questions.

#### **Interview Log**

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:19 Michelle is the Direct Services Coordinator for the Abused Adult Resource Center (AARC). Her job duties include:
- Oversees AARC's
    - emergency shelter
    - transitional shelter
    - visitation center, and
    - housing programs and AARC's apartment building.
  - Grant reporting
  - Collecting statistics
  - Going over staff cases and shelter placements
  - Scheduling
- 00:01:14 Clients are generally women and children, some male clients at times;
- 00:01:28 How AARC works with clients: Clients are typically in a crisis of sexual assault or domestic abuse; staff talk with them to find out what is going on; services are not for generally homeless individuals who haven't experienced sexual violence or domestic assault;
- 00:02:50 Ages: they serve children up to 18, though older male children will be assessed since there is communal living with sharing kitchens and bathrooms. Adults ages range from 18 to 70. Families have their own rooms, generally, but singles are in one room; staff have put mats on the floor to accommodate additional people when necessary;
- 00:04:21 Area served is a 7-county region with a population of 110,000;
- 00:04:51 Capacity of emergency shelter is 38; transitional housing is 25; apartment building has seven efficiency units that are permanent supportive housing;

- 00:05:15 When people arrive most are in immediate crisis; AARC has a 24-hour crisis line; also law enforcement and hospital emergency rooms will connect people with AARC;
- 00:06:02 AARC staffs a 72-hour shelter on the nearby Standing Rock reservation; at any time in AARC's Bismarck location, 50% of clients are Native American women; many have not had stable housing for years; AARC will help furnish apartments also;
- 00:07:59 Sources of AARC client's income; staff see what assistance they are eligible for such as WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) or TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families); Bismarck has many day labor places; AARC doesn't rush people into working so they can recover from trauma; AARC provides employment support such as resumes, make-overs, and opportunity to work at AARC's thrift store;
- 00:09:09 Types of day labor are housekeeping at area hotels, retail, Cloverdale meat packing; many have not worked due to oppressive partner controlling them; discussion of the challenges of receiving government assistance but losing benefits even if you take a minimum wage job and cannot make ends meet;
- 00:11:06 Rent costs skyrocketed during the oil boom; many current wages don't enable people to afford rent; currently, two-bedrooms are \$1,000 or \$1,200 per month but before the boom were \$600 or \$700; rents went down out west after the boom, but not as much in Bismarck;
- 00:12:55 During the oil boom, there were only two domestic violence or sexual violence shelters in the Bakken area of western North Dakota; AARC got many calls from trafficking victims and still do, but not as many;
- 00:14:07 How homelessness is different from violence specific homelessness; can be more complicated as trauma is an additional layer and finding a house will not fix the other issues that come with being victimized; addiction services and mental health services are not readily available in the Bismarck area; some victims have not been allowed to make decisions, so they need to re-learn how to make decisions; a HUD grant enables AARC to work with families for six months; a Burleigh County Housing "Shelter Plus Care" contract helps pay rent and enables AARC to provide the care; discussion of the importance of case management; in AARC's transitional shelter, people can stay up to two years; support during the transition is critical lest they lose their housing; they help with custody issues and provide a visitation center for parents to safely be with shared children; if beds are full, they will fit people on couches if necessary;
- 00:22:17 Rural areas and isolation as an issue; an AARC advocate manages rural areas and can transport people; law enforcement also transports people; for safety advocates will not likely go to the home, but rather meet at someplace public; a story about meeting a woman at a church; on the phone they will make a "safety plan" with the person;
- 00:24:28 How the shelter operates; a crisis intake is done; they make a safety plan; shelter staff shows them around; they can eat; AARC offers a "menu" of services that are voluntary rather than dictated; the emergency shelter has two advocates and one child advocate; guests stay about 30 days and then can move to transitional shelter; there is one case manager and one education and employment advocate in the transitional housing; stipends are given to provide an income to women as they progress;
- 00:27:31 Safety of the buildings; they attempt to keep the location confidential; have multiple security cameras and keep doors locked; people buddy up; panic buttons bring the police in three minutes;

- 00:29:03 If people want to return to the abusive partner, they can, but Michelle will try to learn why and if there are other options; individuals may still love their abusive partner; children may learn abusive behaviors; Lutheran Social Services has a batterer's treatment program; the West Central Human Service Center offers counseling; AARC is part of a task force called People United for Living in Safe Environments (PULSE) with representatives from many areas to make services more accessible to offenders and victims; PULSE began in 1989 and was difficult to start due to differences between advocates and law enforcement; North Dakota may have the best domestic abuse laws in the country; law enforcement can screen for "lethality"; story about Chief of Police seeking out Michelle to refer someone;
- 00:33:31 Michelle came to this work by going back to school in her 30s in criminal justice; she needed to volunteer as part of her degree and met Diane at a friend's house; Diane told her to come to AARC; Michelle intended to work in probation or parole;
- 00:34:18 Challenges of hearing difficult stories has gotten better; her first year she had a difficult case and she worried about the victim and knew she had to learn to separate work from personal life; "it's their life and choices"; national statistics say a woman will go back to her abuser seven times before finally breaking free; success stories balance out the challenging work; story of a woman who was recovering well and then got involved with a problematic individual;
- 00:38:21 Emergency Shelter stay doesn't have a time limit, depends on space and on the women;
- 00:38:56 Funding streams dictate some things such as target numbers; Michelle manages the work under about 50 different grants; discussion of various waiting lists for housing and when North Dakota residents get priority (due to influx of people during the Bakken oil boom and the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) on the Standing Rock reservation; discussion of additional shelter and housing needs in Bismarck;
- 00:42:27 Larger funders include Bremer Bank, United Way; most AARC grants are federal grants; 27% of income is from their thrift store; description of the annual "Christmas Store" bringing in \$65,000; expectation that funding will get tight under President Trump; ND legislature discussing budgets this week;
- 00:44:34 Advice for someone entering the field; it's not about your degree but your passion; importance of knowing the resources;
- 00:46:35 Whether the work has changed her; discussion of 1,469 new clients last year and police say we see just a fraction of abuse occurring; discussion with Diane and Michelle about how services have changed and what works;
- 00:53:04 End